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It's Time to Move on: A Reply to John Connelly

Abstract: This article responds to John Connelly's recent article on how historians should treat the history of ideas and practices of nationhood and nationalism in Central and Eastern Europe and the Habsburg Monarchy. The article questions the presumption of a non-ethnic West and Connelly's rejection of the strategic use of national indifference in interpreting the social history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It also suggests that adding an analysis of imperial institutions would help Connelly better understand the complex development of nationalist movements over time.

Zarys treści: Artykuł ten stanowi odpowiedź na artykuł Johna Connelly'ego dotyczący tego, jak historycy powinni traktować historię idei i nacjonalizmu w Europie Środkowej i Wschodniej oraz monarchii habsburskiej. Artykuł kwestionuje założenie o nieetnicznym charakterze nacjonalizmu zachodniego oraz odrzucenie przez Connelly'ego strategicznego wykorzystania indyferentyzmu narodowego w interpretacji historii społecznej XIX i XX w. Sugeruje również, że dodanie analizy instytucji imperialnych pomogłoby Connelly'emu lepiej zrozumieć złożony rozwój ruchów nacjonalistycznych.

Keywords: nationhood, nationalism, West-East binaries, national indifference, Habsburg Empire, language policies

Słowa kluczowe: narodowość, nacjonalizm, Europa Wschodnia, Europa Zachodnia, indyferentyzm narodowy, Imperium Habsburgów, polityka językowa

John Connelly opens his recent article 'Nation as Tragedy: What is Special About Central Europe's Nationalism' with a question whose outline will be familiar to anyone who has also read his 800-page book, *From Peoples Into Nations. A History of Eastern Europe* (Princeton, 2020). Connelly recounts that university students he teaches in the United States in courses on the history of Central and Eastern Europe "usually start with one question: why the region has produced so much destructive nationalism?" (p. 1). Connelly, a respected teacher at the University of California, Berkeley, has more experience than most professors in the United

http://doi.org/10.12775/KlioPL.2025.03

States who teach his subject. In this article, he transforms this subject of student curiosity into an argument about the historical differences that he believes have long separated what is called "Western Europe" from what is called "Central" or "Eastern Europe". The fact that his article title refers only to "Central Europe" should not distract us from Connelly's inclusion of regions and peoples, which he referred to in his book as "Eastern" Europe. As he describes it, they are the peoples located "between France and the Russian lands" (p. 3).

To illustrate the students' question about why the "East" of Europe has produced so much destructive nationalism, Connelly then compares the histories of Bohemia and France. One, he calls a kingdom torn by ethnic strife, while the other is "a republic under rule of law", with a history of successfully "admitting and absorbing peoples". Students of French and colonial history might reasonably question the alleged success of the French state in "absorbing" people, especially given the history of the twentieth century, not to mention the early modern wars of religion.[1] But many readers will accept Connelly's depiction of Bohemia, where the allegedly unsolvable problems, he argues, are the product of two historically distinct ethnic groups battling for hegemony. This battle, he argues, first came to the surface during the revolutionary events of 1848, although its historical roots reach back centuries. The events of 1848 themselves become a kind of proof for the very different trajectories he observed for "West" and "East". While for Connelly, 1848 in France constituted a "milestone on the stony path toward a self-governing nation state" (pp. 2–3), in Bohemia, he argues that the revolution revealed incompatible Czech and German visions for the future of the state.[2] According to Connelly, this kind of ethnic incompatibility lies at the heart of the differences between a "West", where nation-state borders allegedly match ethnic or nation identities, and an "East", where a "patchwork" quality of ethnic and national identities has promoted conflict for centuries.

[1] For example, Laird Boswell, 'From Liberation to Purge Trials in the "Mythic Provinces": Recasting French Identities in Alsace and Lorraine 1918–1920', *French Historical Studies*, 23, no. 1 (2000), 129–162; Tara Zahra, '"The "Minority Problem" and National Classification in French and Czechoslovak Borderlands', *Contemporary European History*, 17, no. 2 (2008), 137–165. Zahra challenges a binary understanding of West and East regarding regimes of ethnic classification and minority rights, arguing that French practice after the First World War was more radical and racist than Czechoslovak practice. This is not to argue that French practice is similar to that found in Eastern Europe but rather that the differences between the two regions may not lie in degrees of ethnic mixing or even state policy.

[2] Connelly also simplifies the diversity of views within those national communities in Bohemia during the revolutionary year, as well as the German nationalist turn away from the concept of a united Germany to an effort to protect a constitutional Austria by the fall of 1848. An example of a leading Bohemian German nationalist who embodied this turn was Ludwig von Löhner whose writings on the subject are easily available to historians; Pieter M. Judson, *Exclusive Revolutionaries: Liberal Politics, Social Experience, and National Identity in the Austrian Empire, 1848–1914* (Ann Arbor MI, 1996), especially 63–64.

Leaving aside the greater amount of violence and death experienced by the French in 1848–1849 compared to the Bohemians, and focusing purely on events in the East, Connelly proceeds to explore what he believes makes the history of this "East" distinctive from that of a "West". As with his book *Peoples into Nations*, Connelly argues that ideas and emotions about national or ethnic commonalities and community largely predated the nineteenth century. At the outset, he argues particularly against modern theories of the nation (especially those of Gellner and Anderson) that see nationhood as historically constructed thanks largely to the effects and demands of modern capitalism. (pp. 3–5) Connelly's critique of Gellner and Anderson is well taken, if a bit narrow in its understanding of Anderson in particular. But he is right to argue that these theories did little to explain the how and why of the adoption and spread of ideas about nationhood.

While I fundamentally disagree with many of Connelly's arguments, especially his narrow interpretation of the scholarship around ideas of national indifference (referred to as "NI"), many of his insights are useful. Connelly is neither a proponent of nor defender of nationalism, and he does not argue for a return to nationalist paradigms in historical scholarship. He proposes a different approach, however, one that locates popular nationhood much earlier in Eastern Europe's history. It is an approach that relies partly on the work of early modern observers, travelers, and scientists. However, as Gary Cohen noted regarding Connelly's 2020 book, "Connelly gives great attention to the ideas and political initiatives of leading nationalist activists…" while "Social change gets less coverage…".[3] Connelly's argument rests on the published works of literate activists and observers, and far less on the attitudes or actions of the popular classes. This may be why Connelly's interpretation of ideas about national indifference – arguments that rest on local evidence about popular attitudes – is at best dismissive.

I should say that when I first read this article, I wondered about the very need to write it in the first place.[4] Hadn't these arguments already been made cogently in *Peoples Into Nations*? To me, the article betrayed an element of frustration on Connelly's part, as if he were dissatisfied with the reception of his 2020 book and wanted to restate its arguments for a readership that has been seduced by the current popularity of NI, an approach that he characterizes as a politicized theory based on a questionable historical method. This is regrettable, especially because scholarship around the idea of NI could in fact lend support to some – if not all – of Connelly's arguments.

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[3] Gary B. Cohen, 'John Connelly's Long March Through Eastern European History', *Austrian History Yearbook*, 52 (2021), 275.

[4] The original article version to which I refer had the title 'Nation as Tragedy: The Stories of Central Europe' and appeared in the *Journal of Modern History*, 96, no. 2 (2024), 403–442. My comments refer to Connelly's claims in that article, which has been shortened for this publication, and my further references (page numbers) refer to the original article.

There are, however, other serious problems with the history Connelly tells, problems that also call his own methodological approach into question. Connelly has next to nothing to say about the institutions and administrative practices of the Habsburg empire that governed much of Central and Eastern Europe. He draws most of his examples from this empire, yet he ignores the large amount of superb scholarship on imperial institutions, administrative practice, and judicial decisions. For him, the state before the successor states wasn't a regulating state at all. He fails to address the many critical ways in which Habsburg structures and practices gave shape to rising nationalisms in the region. Nor does he even gesture to the ways that nationalism and imperial patriotism are often intimately related to each other. He finds the reasons for the radicalization of nationalist politics in the Austrian half of the late Habsburg empire in a generalized imperial "oppression", yet he ignores the dynamics of political radicalization in this liberalizing state. He seems especially ignorant of the details of Imperial Austria's and Hungary's school systems before and after 1868 (on which there is an impressive literature). He ignores the Austrian judicial system, especially the verdicts rendered by its highest administrative court (*Verwaltungsgerichtshof*) that largely favored the petitions and demands of the nationalists who are his subjects.[5] This absence of empire in Connelly's analysis constitutes a serious weakness in an article that otherwise offers some useful insights to scholars of nationalism.

The East is Different?

United States college students can't really be blamed for asking why nationalism in the East has produced a more violent history than nationalism in the West. But perhaps they are simply posing a question that the United States' minimal education about these regions has programmed in advance? Thanks in large part to Cold War legacies that produced scholarship emphasizing the fundamental developmental differences between East and West, a range of journalists, politicians, and university professors have emphasized Eastern Europe's long history of difference from the West. The nationalist violence we see there simply confirms popular and older academic stereotypes. I do not deny the developmental differences among different regions of Europe, including Southern Europe, but as several scholars of the East have pointed out, the imagined chasm in development between East and West itself has a long history.[6]

[5] On administrative practice and the courts, see especially Gerald Stourzh, *Die Gleichberechtigung der Nationalitäten in der Verfassung und Verwaltung Österreichs 1848–1918* (Vienna, 1985). On schools and language equality in Cisleithania, see Hannelore Burger, *Sprachenrecht und Sprachengerechtigkeit im österreichischen Unterrichtswesen 1867–1918* (Vienna, 1995).

[6] Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA, 1994); Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York, 1997); Mark Mazower, *The Balkans: A Short History* (New York, 2002).

The East may indeed have suffered ongoing ethnic conflict in the last century and a half, but had the states of the West historically overcome such conflict by the nineteenth century? Anyone who has studied the complex histories of violent ethnic conflict in the United Kingdom (especially Ireland) or Spain or Italy might paint a more differentiated picture of ethnic nationalism in the West. I am not suggesting that Europe's Eastern and Western and Southern regions have similar histories in this regard, especially during and after the Cold War. Instead, I would like to see us examine these fundamental long-durée beliefs about the meanings and causes of ethnic conflict in Europe more critically and comparatively. If we continue to make Central and Eastern Europe the "ethnic" part of Europe, we are in danger of promoting a highly ahistoric picture of the entire continent. And an ahistoric picture is the opposite of what Connelly seeks to establish.

History's Subjects: Nations or People?

For Connelly, the subjects of this European history appear to be linguistically defined ethnic or national groups, rather than individuals, local communities, broader social groups, regional powers, or even the empires that governed them. The importance of the fascinating individuals that people his article (and his 2020 book) lies in their contributions to promoting a "group understanding" of their nation. He does admit that nationalism was interpreted and adapted to local needs (p. 420). Yet the very need for such adaptation shows that ideas of nationhood, even in the nineteenth century were highly varied and meant very different things to very different people. If it means such different things regionally, and over time, then can we really argue for the existence of large, coherent self-aware ethnic groups? Did German speakers in Vorarlberg believe that their linguistic similarities with German speakers in Bukovina or Volynia (where the German language in these regions differed substantially) made them a part of the same larger significant ethnic or national community?[7] Is the nation the important actor in history, or is it the people who understand and interpret nationhood in ways that best serve their local interests and their understandings of the world? Connelly does not deny that nationhood could mean very different things to different groups, but

[7] Additionally, in 1848, literate German speakers in Bohemia might have understood themselves as part of a larger nation because of their recent relationship to the Holy Roman Empire of the German nation. But this condition certainly would not have applied to German speakers in Transylvania or Galicia, for example. See, among others, Laurence Cole, *'Für Gott, Kaiser und Vaterland': Nationale Identität der deutschsprachigen Bevölkerung Tirols 1860–1914* (Frankfurt a.M., 2000); Pieter M. Judson, 'When is a diaspora not a diaspora? Rethinking Nation-Centered Narratives about Germans in Habsburg East Central Europe', in Krista O'Donnell, Renate Bridenthal, and Nancy Reagin (eds), *The Heimat Abroad: The Boundaries of Germanness* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2005), 218–247.

for him, the sense (often aggrieved) of ethnic solidarity makes such differences minor and irrelevant to his analysis.

One of Connelly's most important arguments in this regard is that scholars should look further back than the nineteenth century and pay closer attention to the meanings of nationhood in the early modern period – a quite sensible recommendation. But here, his purpose is not so much to historicize concepts of nationhood as to argue for the existence of something equivalent to a more modern, nineteenth-century understanding of nationhood in earlier centuries. Connelly does point to the highly diverse meanings associated with that the term "nation" in earlier centuries and to the more important elements of identification such as religion, region, community, or estate. At the same time, he asks, if the idea of modern ethnic nationhood did not develop until the nineteenth century, then "why did people in Serbia, Poland, or Bohemia sacrifice and die for nationhood before the onset of statehood, capitalism, or literacy?" (p. 404). One obvious answer to this question might be that when people sacrificed their lives for "the nation" before 1800, "nation" meant something very different to them than what we think it means today. If the fact that people were willing to die for nationhood in earlier periods suggests to him that a concept of national ethnic community must have existed, then we need to investigate – at the level of individuals and localities! – the precise understandings of what people were willing to die for. Who were the people willing to die? And why did dying feel like a necessary sacrifice? The sources Connelly cites to answer these questions tend to be published accounts made by literate observers. I am all in favor of historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries learning more about the early modern period. But in addition to evidence written by scholars or travelers from earlier centuries, we need evidence about people and their quotidian practices as they relate to their sense of nationhood.

Rejecting National Indifference

As mentioned above, Connelly disparages the strategy of "national indifference" (or indifference to nationhood) (NI), which scholars have increasingly applied to their analyses of nationalism in Western, Central, Southern, and Eastern Europe. This is a shame, because in many ways Connelly's own analysis could benefit from the work of practitioners of NI whom he disparages. Connelly almost willfully misunderstands the very meanings of "national indifference" and of the diverse ways historians have used it. This misunderstanding derives in part from his belief that national indifference is a politicized theory largely imposed by scholars on historical events, rather than a theoretical approach rooted in an examination of the sources. The rise of thinking about "national indifference", he argues,

emerged from "scholars' furious [*sic*] rejection" of the simplistic "primordial ethnic hatreds" rhetoric developed in the USA to explain the violent collapse of Yugoslavia in the 1990s (p. 427).[8] Connelly sees the popularity of NI largely as a product of the imposition of Rogers Brubaker's sociological theory onto historical analysis in the period around 2000. In fact, NI as an analytical strategy has far deeper origins in the work of historians of Central and Eastern Europe going back almost fifty years. We can easily see it in the foundational 1981 work of Gary B. Cohen on the German minority in Prague, and from a very different perspective, in the magisterial work of Gerald Stourzh on national equality and the courts in Imperial Austria. It is clearly present in István Deák's analysis of the Habsburg officer corps and especially in regional studies by local historians and anthropologists. Several of Stourzh's students also produced critical works that influenced the thinking behind NI.[9]

Using these works as a starting point, scholars like Jeremy King, James Bjork, myself, and Tara Zahra sought to move away from nationalist narratives as the central analytical framework of the analysis of Habsburg Central Europe.[10] This strategy thought more in transnational terms as well, going beyond nationally contained histories to understand local and regional conditions across nation--states. What differentiated this work from the influential work of sociologist

[8] In more than one published interview, I have indeed argued that my own frustration with popular explanations of the fall of Yugoslavia influenced my choice to investigate conflict on some of the so-called "language frontiers" in Imperial Austria. This resulted in my book *Guardians of the Nation*. But I have also explained on many occasions that the book I set out to write after the fall of Yugoslavia changed greatly thanks to my encounter with the archival sources. See, for example, Stefano Bottoni and Marco Bresciani, '"Becoming a Historian is a Passion": A Conversation with Pieter Judson on Habsburg Europe', *Passato e Presente*, 125 (2025), 149–169, DOI 10.3280/PASS2025-125008.

[9] Gary B. Cohen, *The Politics of Ethnic Survival: Germans in Prague, 1861–1914* (Purdue University Press, 2006); Stourzh, *Gleichberechtigung*; István Deák, *Beyond Nationalism: A Social and Political History of the Habsburg Officer Corps* (Oxford, 1990); Emil Brix, *Die Umgangssprachen in Altösterreich zwischen Agitation und Assimilation. Die Sprachenstatistik in den Zisleithanischen Volkszählungen, 1880 bis 1910* (Vienna, 1982); Burger, *Sprachenrecht und Sprachgerechtigkeit*. See also Dominique Kirchner Reill's *Nationalists Who Feared the Nation: Adriatic Multinationalism in Habsburg Dalmatia, Trieste, and Venice* (Stanford, 2012).

[10] The earliest scholars to develop this approach worked on the regions of Upper Silesia, Bohemia, and Transylvania, but its application soon spread beyond those regions. James Bjork, *Neither German nor Pole: Catholicism and National Indifference in a Central European Borderland, 1890–1922* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2008); Jeremy King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans: A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848–1948* (Princeton University Press, 2005); Pieter M. Judson, *Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria* (Cambridge, MA, 2006); id., 'Nationalism and Indifference', in Johannes Feichtinger and Heidemarie Uhl (eds), *Habsburg neu denken. Vielfalt und Ambivalenz in Zentraleuropa. 30 kulturwissenschaftliche Stichworte* (Vienna, 2016), 148–155; Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands* (Ithaca, 2008); id., 'Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis', *Slavic Review*, 69, no. 1 (2010), 93–119.

Brubaker was its commitment to close readings of sources taken primarily from local archives and local histories. NI developed from two related observations about those sources. The first observation was that in regions where people who spoke different languages lived in close proximity to each other, nationalist commitment did not always shape daily life practices. In many such regions, people learned enough of the second local language to communicate at markets, at church, at school, and with their neighbors. Many people (particularly, but not only, in Bohemia and Moravia) viewed it as an economic advantage for their children to know something of both languages of the region.[11] NI never required or implied that people were somehow ignorant of nationalism or even that they actively opposed it. Nationally indifferent people may even have expressed nationalist feelings during election time, but they soon returned to more typical daily life practices that ignored the demands of nationalist commitment.

Above all, the scholars who turned to this strategy never saw NI as a fixed alternative form of identification to a national identity, as Connelly often implies. In portraying national indifference as some kind of alternative form of identification to nationalism, Connelly ignored the fundamental argument behind it: that scholars should focus more on the specific *situations* that produced moments of intense nationalist feeling or violence, rather than treating nationalism as a fixed and consistent norm in society. This approach sought to investigate the *situations* in which such people acted in a nationalist way and those situations where they declined to do so. The purpose of this approach, after all, was to help us more easily understand people, their subjectivities and their contexts as the actors in history rather than treating undifferentiated nations as historical actors.

Contemporaries often explained local brawls or riots as examples of nationalist emotion. In fact, these incidents demonstrated the presence of many other complicating factors (especially alcohol) that might not necessarily produce a nationalist interpretation of the incident.[12] At the same time, however, newspapers, local, and regional politicians consistently sought nationalist explanations for incidents big and small, and portrayed them in these terms. This explains why nationalism often became an inescapable subject of public debate, even if it was not often in people's minds. It also explains a conundrum with which Connelly struggles (p. 440). He claims, historians have yet to plumb the processes and dynamics that produced

[11] For Bohemian and Moravian examples, see Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls*; for one locality in Styria, see Karin Almasy, *Wie aus Marburgern "Slowenen" und "Deutsche" wurden: ein Beispiel zur beginnenden nationalen Differenzierung in Zentraleuropa zwischen 1848 und 1861* (Bad Radkersburg – Graz, 2014). There are now many similar local studies from regions throughout the Habsburg Monarchy.

[12] For one example of this dynamic, Pieter M. Judson, 'Nationalist Emotion as *Fin-de-Siècle* Legal Defense? A 1908 Trial in Celje/Cilli', *Acta Histriae*, 21, no. 4 (2013), 735–748.

radicalization. NI may not fully explain these dynamics, but as I explain below, historians have in fact gone a very long way in plumbing these processes with arguments that Connelly doesn't address.

The second observation NI scholars developed *from the sources*, was how nationalist activists themselves often described people's daily-life practices as somehow dangerous to their nations. After all, it was nineteenth-century nationalists who invented the term "national indifference" in the first place. Nationalists expended great effort to root out the kinds of practices they thought could endanger their nations, arguing that indifference could lead to the decline of the nation. Their writings, their publications, their private letters demonstrate ongoing frustration with a range of phenomena, from "intermarriage" to parents' multi-lingual education choices, to the unwillingness of people to boycott local businesses owned by speakers of the other regional language, to church attendance in the "wrong language". This frustration, and this attempt to force people to become more national or to risk being excluded from the national community, helps in part to explain the phenomenon among nationalists of increasing political radicalism. As Tara Zahra convincingly argued two decades ago, the very fact of indifference drove nationalists to radicalize their threats and their practices. This point explains a large part of the process of nationalist radicalization, and it would be interesting to see how Connelly might treat it.

As with his book, *Peoples into Nations*, Connelly tends to ignore and occasionally even disparage this NI approach. But it might in fact help him to better ground his own arguments. Connelly defines national indifference in two misleading ways. First, as mentioned above, he sees it as a specific, alternate, identity position, something that the scholars who developed this strategy rejected from the start. National indifference was never a clear *alternative* to nationalist feeling as Connelly implies. Instead, it was a way to understand common daily life behaviors and choices that did not always follow a nationalist logic. Secondly, as also mentioned above, Connelly argues that national indifference is a "theory" imposed on the facts by theory-driven scholars. NI ideas, however, originated long before the theory that Connelly argues its proponents have somehow imposed on history. National indifference grew out of the archive; it was not imposed on the archive! And to repeat it, the very term "national indifference" was invented not by today's scholars but by contemporary Czech and German nationalists in the nineteenth century who were frustrated that many people did not consistently adopt nationalist outlooks in their daily life practices.

Of course, one can find examples of nationalist violence across the region, especially in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. But, as I have pointed out, opportunistic newspapers and politicians often promoted the idea that a range of violent incidents were predominantly nationalist in nature. When ethnic violence did occur, as historian David Smrček has argued

most recently for the Badeni disturbances of 1897, it was often aggravated by specific local tensions rather than broad-based nationalist hostility.[13] And again, as many scholars have also noted, local violent incidents characterized in the press as nationalist in nature, were often brawls produced as much by alcohol consumption and local enmities as by a consciousness of nationhood. Nationalism could be a powerful emotion that drove people's individual choices and actions in some situations. But we should not start from the presumption that this applied to most people in local society unless we have archival evidence for that. Before the 1990s, this presumption of near-universal nationalist emotion governed too much historiography of Habsburg Central Europe.

There is one more important point to make about NI that Connelly also leaves out of his analysis, and that has special importance for the period after the First World War. In the interwar period individuals and families often used their ambiguous national identifications opportunistically to influence how a given regime categorized them. Since it was largely the successor states and not the empire that imposed forms of national ascription on individuals and families, NI often became a strategy to undermine that ascription, depending on the interests of the family in question. Thus, to restate the obvious, NI doesn't presume ignorance of or even rejection of nationalist loyalty.[14]

Where's Empire?

A further problem with Connelly's argumentation about the differences between Western Europe and Central or Eastern Europe lies in his tendency to view states like the Habsburg Monarchy (or the Ottoman Empire) as somehow imposed on unwilling nations. The rule of these multinational empires, he argues, has historically stifled and humiliated national communities in their efforts to develop culturally, economically, politically, and socially. This is hardly accurate for the Habsburg example, where popular local initiatives engaged with and supported empire down to 1914. In Connelly's analysis, empires and their institutions rarely play a role, except generally, as the agents that repressed nation statehood. Connelly ought to take more into consideration the specific institutions, laws, and administrative practices of empire that in fact encouraged the development of many forms of nationhood, not in opposition to the state, while simultaneously creating spaces for citizens to vent their dissatisfaction.

[13] David Smrček, 'The Last Days of Old Imperial Austria. Street Politics and Violence in Cisleithania in 1897', PhD dissertation, University of Vienna, 2025.

[14] For examples, Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls*; Bjork, *Neither German*; Brendan Karch, *Nation and Loyalty in a German Polish Borderland: Upper Silesia, 1848–1960* (Cambridge, 2018); Kathryn Ciancia, *On Civilization's Edge: A Polish Borderland in the Interwar World* (Oxford, 2020).

It is hard to imagine politicians in the Austrian half of the dual monarchy staking their electoral claims on their commitment to the nation, if they had not enjoyed the administrative practices and constitutional guarantees that validated and fostered linguistic and confessional diversity. Famously, in the Austrian half of the dual Monarchy (unlike in the Hungarian half), the constitution itself spelled out the linguistic rights of citizens to an 8-year primary education in their own language and the right to address the administration in their own language. These guarantees and practices were exceptional among European states (West or East – can we imagine such laws in nineteenth-century Ireland?). Also contrary to Connelly's assertion about schools in the empire, schoolbooks were in fact oriented to the specificities of the crownlands, including language use and local mythologies, precisely to educate pupils to greater patriotism by aligning nationalist mythology with the empire.[15] In Hungary, meanwhile, Ágoston Berecz has analyzed from below the failure of Magyarization efforts in Transylvanian schools in the final decades of the nineteenth century.[16]

The Austrian constitutional guarantees encouraged forms of political practice oriented to the development of ideas about expanding the "rights" of nations. If, for example, the constitution guaranteed primary schooling in one's language, then why not secondary or university education? Nationalist conflict quickly became a critical phenomenon among politicians and the media, as nationalists used the constitution to push for further reforms and greater political autonomy. In the Austrian half of the Dual Monarchy, the rise of nationalist political parties changed the profiles of civil servants in the regional crownlands considerably. By 1910, for example, Czech speakers dominated the Bohemian bureaucracy as

[15] There is now a large literature on this question of schools, textbooks, teaching, and the relationship of nationalism and imperial patriotism. Some few examples: Ernst Bruckmüller, 'Nationalbewusstsein und Grundschulbildung im alten Österreich', in Siegfried Beer (ed.), *Focus Austria: Vom Vielvölkerreich zum EU-Staat: Festschrift für Alfred Ableitinger* (Graz, 2003), 164–179; Ernst Bruckmüller, 'Patriotic and National Myths: National Consciousness and Elementary School Education in Imperial Austria', in Laurence Cole and Daniel L. Unowsky (eds), *The Limits of Loyalty: Imperial Symbolism, Popular Allegiances, and State Patriotism in the Late Habsburg Monarchy* (New York – Oxford, 2007); Scott O. Moore, *Teaching the Empire: Education and State Loyalty in Late Habsburg Austria* (West Lafayette, IN, 2020), 11–35; Karin Almasy, 'An Unintended Consequence: How the Modern Austrian School System Helped Set Up the Slovene Nation', *Austrian History Yearbook*, 55 (2024), 121–139; ead., 'Die erste nationale Differenzierung in der Schule: Maribor zwischen 1848 und 1861', in Mira Miladinovič Zalaznik and Tanja Žigon (eds), *Stiki in sovplivanja med središčem in obrobjem: Medkulturne literarnovedne študije* (Ljubljana, 2014), 129–143; Jan Bernot and Rok Stergar, 'A Cacophony of Classifications: Education and Identification in a Prenational Empire', *Nationalities Papers* (March 2024), 1–18, https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/nationalities-papers/article/cacophony-of-classifications-education-and-identification-in-a-prenational-empire/2DD4C62207BE4B9596BA95BCD8C9E753 (accessed 12 Nov. 2025).

[16] Ágoston Berecz, *The Politics of Early Language Teaching: Hungarian in the Primary Schools of the Later Dual Monarchy* (Budapest, 2013).

did Italian speakers in Trieste and the Littoral, or Polish speakers in Galicia.[17] Non-Magyar groups in Hungary were very much aware of this dynamic in Austria as well. Of course, as with any nineteenth- or twentieth-century state (France included), Imperial Austria's ability to implement these constitutional goals was not consistent, and we can find many examples (as in the West) of miscarriages of linguistic justice. The point here is that empire provided a legal and administrative framework for nationalist development. It did not simply function as an imagined opponent of the nation but also as its legal and administrative protector. Certainly, over time, the Austrian courts that decided cases of alleged discrimination based on language use tended to side with the demands of nationalists.[18]

Connelly did not investigate or analyze imperial institutions and practices to see them as possible explanatory factors in his larger analysis of nationalism in Central and Eastern Europe. This strikes me as a serious gap in his work. One reason for the prominence of this gap may lie in the fact that when we add an analysis of imperial institutions to the bigger picture, we see more clearly that nationalism and nationalist conflict are more associated with the realm of *formal politics*, and less with the realm of *everyday life*. If nationalism is more of a political phenomenon (and we today know how much political struggle can produce extremely powerful emotions!), then perhaps it is not so clearly a popular loyalty that originates solely from within the national or ethnic people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I return first to the question that opens Connelly's article, the question posed by his students about the violence of eastern or central European nationalism. He treats this observation made by his students as if it were somehow true, because of the frequency with which it is asked. I am not as certain about this as Connelly appears to be, that because an idea is popular, it is somehow true. Is it helpful for historians to presume from the start that ethnic and nationalist conflict is a fundamental *longue durée* characteristic of what we call Central or Eastern Europe? I don't question the possibility that regions within Europe have developed distinctive characteristics based on their histories. But are those histories overdetermined by a single characteristic ("ethnic patchwork") that itself is a product of historical development? And do we find this "ethnic patchwork" in Eastern Europe because we are looking for it from the start? Does it matter over longer periods of time? Do we perhaps overvalue it as a leading cause of conflictual politics and social violence in this part of Europe? And how

[17] See, for example, the work of Martin Klečacký for Bohemia. This phenomenon was less the case for the Imperial bureaucracy.

[18] Stourzh, *Gleichberechtigung*.

much does a "violence-prone Eastern Europe" model work before and beyond the twentieth century?

And how, in turn, should we treat Connelly's abbreviated version of what he calls "the West"? When nationalist, ethnic, or confessional violence appeared in "the West" was it merely an exception to the norm? Examples of this kind of conflict are not hard to find in this "West", but they don't exactly fit with what we tell ourselves about "the West's" general character. Any student of Irish history who reads Connelly might wonder whether Irish history counts as "western?" Can we legitimately argue that in Britain, Italy, Spain, Belgium, or Finland, ethnic conflict (and not simply from five hundred years ago) has not produced its own histories of violence and oppression, even if they look different from the histories of the "East"? Or is it merely a matter of degree? Connelly's students could reasonably ask, for example, why there is apparently *more* ethnic/nationalist violent conflict in Central and Eastern Europe than in Western Europe, specifically in the last 150 years. But perhaps, as I suggested at the outset, their question is a product of what US American textbooks and teachers of Western European history (not to mention journalists and politicians) have taught them. A more intelligent comparison might help us to pose different questions in the first place. We could compare how European empires (British, French, Italian, Habsburg, Ottoman, Romanov, Spanish among them) managed conflicts around language use, the practice of religion, or minority rights. We could ask how self-styled European nation-states with colonial empires managed ethnic diversity at home when it came to the rights of citizenship in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries?

As we move further away from the Cold War, does it still make sense historically to divide European experience fundamentally between a West and an East (or a Center or a South), especially when internally, the many regions that form Europe's "West" or the "East" differ from each other in so many ways? The real tragedy in Connelly's title ("Nation as Tragedy") might in fact be the very ways we have approached the topic of nationhood in the first place.

I want to end my comments, however, on a different and more positive note. In July 2025, an extraordinary group of over four hundred younger and older scholars of Habsburg Central Europe from around the world met in Vienna at the first Central European History Convention ("Shared Pasts, Entangled Future") (CEHC). Here we presented and discussed research, networked with each other, and continued to build what has become a thriving and remarkably friendly and respectful global community of diverse scholars. The convention produced highly insightful blogs by younger scholars who wrote about the topics, methods, and discussions they had encountered at the conference. These topics ranged from the Habsburg Monarchy's often invisible but influential global presence to histories of the environment, of gender ("from medieval marketplaces to interwar social work, from urban housing to queer subcultures"), to topics of environmental

history (animal husbandry, river regulation, human/animal relations), to imperial infrastructures, city planning, and new economic histories among so many other topics. In their lucid final statement about the conference, Jana Osterkamp (Augsburg) and Jonathan Singerton (Amsterdam) wrote that:

> What unites this otherwise unruly landscape is a shared intellectual temperament; one that values openness over orthodoxy. The conversations emerging from Vienna suggest that Central European history has become less about guarding boundaries than about experimenting with forms of connection: between disciplines, periods, and publics. Collaboration is the field's animating force. The CEHC itself stood as proof that consensus need not mean uniformity; it can instead signify an ongoing dialogue sustained by mutual curiosity and respect that leads to further insight, creativity, and a collective boldness.[19]

I was inspired by the experience of this remarkable convention, and particularly by the feelings of positive engagement and community building I encountered among scholars of different generations.

I agreed originally to write this response to John Connelly's article because I did not want his accusations about my own and many of my colleagues' work to go unanswered. I would, however, have appreciated an article from him that was framed, like the CEHC itself, *to model further discussion and exchange*, rather than one that tried to close off engagement, felt depressingly argumentative, and occasionally even dismissive of serious historians and their work. In my response, I have tried to point out that there is much to be gained by thinking with and through Connelly, despite our disagreements. Finally, I do believe that our field has long ago moved on from the older debates about NI or nationalism that dominate this article, and this is something that the experience of the July 2025 CEH-Convention strongly confirmed.

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